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# Picturing Madras: A Photographic Archive of a Changing City

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Light on the Coromandel: Origins of Photography in Madras
- **Chapter 2** Studios and Sitters: The Colonial Portrait Economy
- **Chapter 3** Ethnographic Gazes and the Politics of Seeing
- **Chapter 4** Fort, Harbour, and the Colonial Urban Core
- **Chapter 5** Civic Rituals and Public Life, 1850–1910
- **Chapter 6** Hand-Colored Prints, Postcards, and the Tourist Eye
- **Chapter 7** The City Expands: Tramlines, Mills, and Municipal Modernity
- **Chapter 8** Women Before the Lens: Respectability, Labor, and Leisure
- **Chapter 9** Caste and Community: Visual Markers and Social Worlds
- **Chapter 10** Temples, Churches, Mosques: Sacred Geographies
- **Chapter 11** The Politics of Protest: Swadeshi to Independence
- **Chapter 12** Cyclones and Drought: Disaster, Resilience, and Memory
- **Chapter 13** Cinema, Radio, and the New Celebrity
- **Chapter 14** Street Photographers and the Post-Independence Commons
- **Chapter 15** Housing, Slums, and the Right to the City
- **Chapter 16** Work and Workers: Docks, Factories, and Informal Economies
- **Chapter 17** Education and the Campus: Colleges, Libraries, and Debates
- **Chapter 18** Play and Performance: Sports, Music, and Urban Pleasure
- **Chapter 19** Architecture in Transition: Art Deco to Concrete Modern
- **Chapter 20** Plans, Projects, and the Making of Chennai
- **Chapter 21** The Marina and the Seafront: Shorelines in Change
- **Chapter 22** Private Albums, Family Histories, and Migration
- **Chapter 23** Reading Photographs: Method, Context, and Ethics
- **Chapter 24** Archives, Negatives, and the Life of Images
- **Chapter 25** Digital Futures: Preservation, Access, and Community Curation

## Introduction

This book began with a simple, stubborn question: how does a city come to know itself through pictures? Madras—today widely known as Chennai—has been photographed for nearly two centuries, its streets and shorelines rendered in salts, silvers, and pixels by studio proprietors, itinerant camera men, press photographers, and families guarding shoe boxes of prints. Picturing Madras assembles and analyzes this visual record to reveal how people, places, and practices have changed—and how photography has both documented and shaped those transformations.

The chapters that follow move from colonial studios to street corners, from formal portraits to quick exposures made in the turmoil of protest, from hand-colored views meant for tourists to vernacular snapshots treasured in private albums. Together, these images illuminate shifting social landscapes: hierarchies of caste and class, negotiations of gender and respectability, the textures of work and leisure, the evolution of worship and celebration. They also trace the changing architecture of the city, from fort and harbor to tramlines and flyovers, and the public life that unfolds in between—on campuses, in cinemas, along the Marina, and in lanes where commerce and conversation intermingle.

Because photographs are never neutral, this book teaches readers how to read them critically. Each chapter demonstrates methods for attending to vantage point, staging, captioning, circulation, and omission; to the materiality of glass plates, albumen paper, and cellulose acetate; and to the afterlives of negatives and prints in archives and homes. Contextual essays and close readings invite you to look beyond the frame: Who stood behind the camera? Who arranged the scene? Who kept the print, and who was kept out of the picture? By practicing these questions across time, we learn how images encode power and possibility.

Equally important are the lesser-known narratives preserved here. Many of the pictures in these pages come from community collections, neglected boxes in institutional basements, or the worktables of photographers whose names rarely appear in official histories. We foreground their contributions alongside better-documented figures, not as footnotes but as protagonists in a broader visual narrative. In doing so, the book aims to serve both scholars and the public, bridging academic interpretation with accessible storytelling.

Ethical care underlies our approach. Photographs can wound as well as witness; they can reproduce harmful gazes even as they help us remember. Where images depict poverty, illness, or violence, we consider consent, context, and the responsibilities of reproduction. Where captions inherited from the past rely on racialized or casteist

descriptors, we flag and revise with transparency, documenting choices in our notes while keeping the main text readable. The goal is not to sanitize history, but to see it more clearly and humanely.

Methodologically, the book balances breadth and depth. Panoramic chapters map long arcs of urban change, while interludes slow down for close readings of single photographs or small sequences, modeling tools you can use in your own encounters with visual sources. Timelines, maps, and comparative spreads help you trace continuities and ruptures; so do pairings that juxtapose studio portrait and street candid, ceremonial pageant and everyday errand, ruin and renovation. By following these threads, readers can assemble their own arguments about what the camera reveals—and what it cannot.

Finally, Picturing Madras is an invitation. It asks you to look longer, to ask better questions, and to see photographs not as passive records but as active participants in the city's making. If you come away recognizing new authors, noticing overlooked details, or rethinking familiar views, then the archive has done its work. The images in these pages belong to many: to the people who posed and those who pressed the shutter; to custodians who kept them safe; and now, to you, who will look and, perhaps, picture the city anew.

## CHAPTER ONE: Light on the Coromandel: Origins of Photography in Madras

The Coromandel Coast, a vibrant stretch of southeastern India, had long been a crucible of exchange before the camera ever arrived. For centuries, its ports, none more prominent than Madras, hummed with merchants, missionaries, and soldiers from across the globe, their stories etched into ledgers, letters, and the very stones of the city. Then, in the mid-19th century, a new medium emerged, promising to capture these stories with an unprecedented fidelity: photography. It arrived not with a bang, but with the quiet, alchemical magic of silver salts and sunlight, fundamentally altering how Madras would see and be seen.

The earliest whispers of photography reaching India can be traced to the late 1830s and early 1840s, almost immediately after Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot unveiled their revolutionary processes in Europe. While the daguerreotype, with its unique, shimmering silver surface, captivated audiences, it was Talbot's paper-based calotype process that truly laid the groundwork for photography's widespread adoption, particularly in a colonial context where multiple prints were desired for dissemination and study. The journey of these nascent technologies across vast oceans, carried by steamships and the eager hands of enthusiasts, speaks to the global fascination ignited by this new art-science.

Madras, as a significant administrative and commercial hub of the British Empire, was naturally an early recipient of this technological marvel. The city's intellectual and scientific societies, often spearheaded by British civil servants, military officers, and scholars, played a crucial role in introducing and experimenting with photographic processes. These early adopters were not merely technicians; they were often men of varied interests, dabbling in botany, archaeology, and ethnography, viewing the camera as a powerful tool for documentation and discovery.

One of the earliest documented photographic activities in Madras involved the efforts of Dr. Andrew Hunter, a Scottish surgeon and a keen amateur photographer. Hunter, associated with the Madras School of Arts, is credited with introducing photography to the city in the early 1850s. He experimented with various processes, including the calotype and later the wet collodion process, which offered sharper images and shorter exposure times. His work marked a pivotal moment, shifting photography from a mere curiosity to a practical tool with educational and scientific potential.

The Madras School of Arts, established in 1850, quickly became a focal point for the nascent photographic scene. Under Hunter's guidance, photography was integrated

into the curriculum, not just as an art form but as a skill to be applied in various fields. Students, both European and Indian, were taught the intricacies of chemical preparation, darkroom techniques, and the aesthetics of composition. This institutional backing was vital, providing a structured environment for learning and dissemination that was perhaps more formalized than in many other colonial cities.

Beyond the formal institutions, there were also independent pioneers, often European residents with a scientific bent, who experimented in their private studios or makeshift darkrooms. Their early images, though few and far between, offer tantalizing glimpses of a city grappling with a new way of seeing itself. These initial forays often focused on architectural landmarks, scenic views, and sometimes, posed portraits of individuals, reflecting the prevalent interests of the time. The sheer effort involved in these early photographic endeavors—carrying cumbersome equipment, sensitizing plates under challenging climatic conditions, and meticulously processing negatives—speaks volumes about the dedication of these pioneers.

The tropical climate of Madras presented its own unique set of challenges for early photographers. High humidity, intense sunlight, and dust were constant adversaries, affecting the stability of chemicals, the drying of plates, and the preservation of delicate paper prints. Early photographic manuals often contained specific advice for working in tropical environments, a testament to the global spread of photography and the need for localized adaptations. Imagine the patience and perseverance required to achieve a clear, well-preserved image under such conditions.

The very first images of Madras, dating back to the 1850s, were primarily landscapes and architectural studies. These photographs served a dual purpose: they were artistic endeavors, capturing the picturesque qualities of the city, and they were also records, documenting important buildings, infrastructure, and urban vistas for colonial administrators and researchers. The Fort St. George, the Esplanade, and the imposing public buildings often featured prominently, underscoring the colonial gaze that sought to survey and understand its territorial possessions.

One of the significant early practitioners was Captain Linnaeus Tripe, an officer in the Madras Army, who arrived in India in the mid-1850s and quickly distinguished himself as a prolific and technically adept photographer. Tripe's work in Madras and other parts of South India is monumental, producing a vast archive of images that chronicled ancient temples, archaeological sites, and the everyday life of the region. His photographs, often characterized by their sharp detail and expansive compositions, were admired for their aesthetic quality and their ethnographic value.

Tripe's approach was meticulous. He traveled with a retinue of assistants, carrying heavy photographic equipment, including large-format cameras and portable darkrooms. His negatives, often glass plates measuring up to 12x10 inches, were prepared and processed on location, a testament to his dedication and the logistical

challenges of early photography in remote areas. The surviving prints from his expeditions offer invaluable insights into the landscape and cultural heritage of 19th-century Madras Presidency.

The Madras Photographic Society, established in 1856, marked a formalization of photographic interests in the city. It brought together amateur and professional photographers, providing a platform for sharing knowledge, exhibiting work, and fostering a sense of community. The society's proceedings and annual exhibitions showcased the evolving technical prowess and artistic aspirations of its members, many of whom were British officials, military personnel, and some affluent Indian individuals.

These exhibitions were significant social events, offering a glimpse into the visual world being created by the camera. Subjects ranged from portraits and landscapes to architectural studies and, increasingly, ethnographic images. The competitive nature of these exhibitions also spurred innovation and refinement in photographic techniques, as practitioners vied for recognition and awards. The society's existence highlights Madras's position as a vibrant center for scientific and artistic pursuits within colonial India.

Early photographic studios also began to emerge in Madras during this period, signaling the commercialization of photography. These establishments, often run by European professionals, catered to the growing demand for portraits among the colonial elite and prosperous Indian families. The studio environment offered controlled lighting and elaborate backdrops, allowing for carefully posed and idealized representations of sitters. This marked a shift from purely documentary photography to a more personalized and artistic endeavor.

The evolution of photographic processes also played a crucial role in the medium's adoption in Madras. The transition from the daguerreotype and calotype to the wet collodion process in the 1850s was particularly impactful. The wet collodion process, which involved coating a glass plate with collodion emulsion just before exposure, produced much sharper negatives and offered the ability to create multiple positive prints from a single negative. This technical advancement made photography more accessible and commercially viable.

The popularity of carte-de-visite and cabinet card formats in the 1860s and 1870s further fueled the demand for studio portraits. These small, affordable photographic prints became immensely popular for exchange among friends and family, and for collecting in albums. This trend transformed portraiture from an exclusive luxury to a more widespread practice, allowing a broader segment of society to engage with and possess their own photographic likenesses.

Beyond portraits, photography quickly found practical applications in various colonial

enterprises. The Public Works Department utilized photographs to document infrastructure projects, such as railway lines, bridges, and irrigation systems. The archaeological surveys of India employed cameras to record ancient monuments and artifacts, aiding in the classification and preservation of India's rich cultural heritage. These images served as visual evidence, contributing to administrative records and academic research.

Missionaries also recognized the power of the photographic image. They used photographs to document their work, depict local populations, and generate support and funding from their home countries. These images, often imbued with a particular ideological perspective, aimed to visually communicate the "progress" of their evangelical efforts and the perceived "needs" of the local population. The photographic lens thus became intertwined with the colonial project of documenting, categorizing, and, in some cases, reshaping the visual narratives of Madras.

The early photographs of Madras, therefore, are not merely historical artifacts; they are windows into the aspirations, anxieties, and power dynamics of a colonial city. They reveal how European newcomers sought to understand and control their environment, and how, in turn, certain aspects of Indian life were framed and presented for a foreign gaze. By examining these nascent images, we begin to understand the complex interplay between technology, representation, and the shaping of a city's identity.

The limitations of early photographic technology also shaped the visual landscape. Long exposure times meant that moving subjects often appeared blurred or vanished entirely from the frame. This inadvertently led to a preference for static subjects—architecture, landscapes, and carefully posed individuals. The absence of spontaneous street scenes in the earliest archives is not necessarily an indication that such life didn't exist, but rather a reflection of the camera's technical constraints.

As the 19th century progressed, the photographic landscape in Madras continued to evolve. European photographers dominated the early commercial studios, but gradually, Indian photographers began to emerge, learning the trade and establishing their own enterprises. This gradual indigenization of photographic practice would mark another significant chapter in the visual history of the city, bringing new perspectives and subjects to the fore. However, the initial spark, the light on the Coromandel that first illuminated the possibilities of the camera, was undeniably European in its origin and initial application.

The advent of photography in Madras was therefore a multi-faceted event, encompassing scientific curiosity, artistic expression, commercial enterprise, and colonial documentation. It laid the groundwork for the rich visual archive that this book explores, offering a foundational understanding of how the city first began to picture itself, and how these initial images established certain conventions and perspectives

that would continue to influence photographic practices for decades to come. The silent, silvered surfaces of these early prints hold the echoes of a changing city, viewed through the fresh, discerning eye of a new technology.

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